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ABSTRACT

The implications of the open-door admissions policy of the City Colleges of Chicago are discussed by the chancellor. Characteristics of the student population include an increasing average age of students, a majority of night students, and a large proportion of minorities, particularly Blacks and Hispanics. As a public community college system, there is a need to be sensitive to training students for public and private agencies. A major problem is that many students lack cognitive skills and self-confidence to learn. Specific problems of the City Colleges are the adequacy of the teaching staff, the reform of the general education program, admissions and exclusion standards, the attrition rate, and the need for more funds to provide support services for disadvantaged students. Many of the faculty have difficulty teaching disadvantaged students, and there is a need to work on objectives and standards of the general education program. The attrition rate is about 35 percent, with evening courses averaging about 45 percent. One approach to problems of the colleges is an experimental basic skills program for disadvantaged students that employs mastery learning techniques and special support services. (SW)

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TESTIMONY OF

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Submitted to:

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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Statement
to National Commission on Excellence in Education
by
Oscar E. Shabat
Chancellor, City Colleges of Chicago

The City Colleges of Chicago is a public, multi-campus, "open-door" educational institution. While our open-door policy has been in existence since 1911, major social changes, especially within the last 30 years, have necessitated significant modifications and adjustments in our policy.

Our current enrollment is approximately 100,000 students. There are more female than male students; the average age has been increasing and is now approximately 30 years; a majority of the students attend during evening hours; and a large proportion of the student body is represented by minority students, particularly Black and Hispanic. As in other big cities, we find that young and older adults must have better academic skills in order to be employable. Moreover, the shift from manufacturing to service occupations, and with vast technological changes, such as in electronics and computers, many are losing their jobs and require new work skills in order to remain in the work force.

As a public community college system, we are sensitive to the needs of training students for public and private agencies. For example, among our 230 different career or occupational programs, which range from certificates for 9 credit hours to an Associate in Applied Science Degree for 60 credit hours, we train the city's police recruits, and the licensed practical nurses and registered nurses. These are several examples of programs which have been instituted in response to community needs.

The major general problem we feel concerns the influx of large numbers of minority as well as non-minority students who come to us unprepared in cognitive skills and in self confidence to learn. As a consequence, our colleges have a growing and disproportionately high remedial educational task to perform. We

admit students who are functional illiterates and many who read between the 6th and 10th grade levels. Many of our students require English as a second language.

The major specific problems which confront the City Colleges are (1) the adequacy of our teaching staff, (2) the reform of our general education program, (3) admissions and exclusion standards, (4) student attrition rate, and (5) the need for additional funds to provide support services for our many disadvantaged students. Let me discuss each of these briefly.

City Colleges of Chicago, like most big city public community colleges, have been in existence for many decades. No longer do we receive high school graduates who come well prepared for college programs. Many of our faculty members were employed at a time when the emphasis was on the "transfer" function, with a heavy emphasis on liberal arts and sciences. As a consequence, many of our faculty find it difficult to teach disadvantaged students. A very common complaint from faculty members is that our students are not able to do college level work. While we have tried to help faculty to better understand our students and to be more effective in teaching through the use, for example, of the Mastery Learning technique, the problem still exists. Nor have the universities helped much in providing the kind of teachers we need.

It has been the philosophy and policy of the City Colleges of Chicago to require students to take one-year general education courses in the natural sciences, the humanities and the social sciences--all stressing that the individual shares significant relationships with a larger community and must understand the major areas of human knowledge. Unfortunately, our general education program has deteriorated and common objectives and standards of achievement leave much to be desired. The total faculty must become involved in the vast and complex reformation of our general education program. We could use funds to produce high quality TV courses in general education which would provide high quality, standard instruction.

There is a growing realization that community college admissions, course and program placement, and probation-exclusion policies and standards must be tightened. Taxpayers and legislators are insisting that the "open door" policy cannot mean that students can stay as long as they like, do whatever they like, and that they cannot fail. Our testing program helps counselors determine the number of courses a student can take and the program in which he or she can be enrolled. Students who do not achieve a minimum grade point average at the end of each semester or term are placed on "academic warning," and those students who show no improvement by the end of the next semester or term are excluded.

Our attrition rates have been excessive. Some faculty members retain at least 90% of their students, while other faculty members lost 85% of their students. Our overall attrition rate each semester is about 35%, with evening courses averaging about 45%. We are examining instances where retention is good but where a disproportionately high percentage of students fail the course. Course prerequisites and improved teaching techniques and supportive student services, such as PLATO, Mastery Learning and tutoring are being used. Faculty members are required to hold conference hours, during which they provide students with individual help.

On an experimental basis, we are spending an additional $119 per year per student for a limited number of disadvantaged students who are placed in bloc programs which emphasize reading, speaking, writing and mathematics. Our first year of the experiment (using experimental and control groups) shows that we can improve the level of reading of a student who reads at least at the 7th grade level by about 2.5 grades in one academic year.

The faculty of the experimental classes are volunteers; they use Mastery Learning as a teaching technique; and they have available all of the special supportive services referred to above. We have found that we are not able to provide much help for the student who reads below the 6th grade level, and our

thinking at this time is that while we will admit such students, they will be placed in a unit below the college level. If we are to expand this promising program to more disadvantaged students above the 6th grade level, additional funds will be needed.

The problems which our colleges have had to face with an open door policy do not call for closing the door and instituting selective admissions as prevail in the universities. The public community college in the big city will continue to receive large numbers of disadvantaged students. While additional funds would be helpful for production of high quality curricular materials and for student supportive services, money alone will not provide the solutions we need. Above all, faculty must be selected who are able and willing to meet the needs of the diversified, cognitively-unprepared, less confident, older and career-oriented student body.